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Marcela

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MARCELA

Ana Chilacatla Momotla¹ — “once upon a time,” they say — fell in love with a man because she understood that none of us belong anywhere without love.

The villagers (which probably means a man) named the town after this woman — San Gabriel Chilac, Puebla — because Ana was beautiful like a dividing ocean, and because they remembered her through the image of her husband, an Aztec leader who dedicated the village to corn and cotton.

But the Aztec leader’s death, a skipping stone in Ana’s broken heart, became el coco — a shadow-figured man whose reflection does not appear in dreams and who visited me once when I became a mother to tell me I will not remember the bedtime stories my mother never told me.

“Your mother never said, ‘once upon a time,’” his lips whispered.

“And if she did,” I replied, “she meant to say, ‘It was, and it was not so².’”

¹Ana Chilacatla Momotla was the governess of San Gabriel Chilac long long ago, sometime during the sixteenth century. She was married to a man named Toltecatl, the governor of el pueblo, who was Achimalacatla, one of the many ethnicities of the Aztecs. Thinking of Toltecatl makes me think of my son because my son’s face has many indigenous features: a bent, bird shaped nose, a square jawline and high cheekbones (he’s quite handsome). Sometimes in dreams I see him riding alongside other men on horseback towards Spanish settlers — a rebellion effort once made by indigenous nomadic groups to stop the northward expansion of Nueva España. In these dreams my son rides through the ahuehuetes, the immense trees that it is said the Aztecs planted long ago, and passes el Árbol de la Noche Triste, where Hernán Cortés wept on the night he had to leave México City (June 30, 1520) after being driven away by a great Aztec slaughter. Today the tree is surrounded by an iron fence in México City.

²Traditional storytellers in Majorca, an island in the Mediterranean Sea, would begin their performances with this phrase. It was meant to convey the stories about the certainty of uncertainty — a reality I know all too well. It has almost become my being.

In the United States it is simple, I tell the girl sitting in front of me who knows my son. You cross a street to interrupt a memory: February 28, 1989.

But crossing allá, through the freckle-stoned mountains of the Imperial Valley desert, it is not that easy, for the devil's highway is long and vast, seemingly never ending. To cross his street tests the body, the mind and reminds you that until you (if you) reach the other side, memory is all that has become of you. And sadly, memory is the last thing that can serve you when you cross la frontera.

Sifting through her bag, the girl who knows my son shows me images of newspapers that are marked with the date of my crossing. "February 28, 1989", I think to myself, "has scarred these histories too."

The day I crossed, the girl tells me, The Boston Globe wrote a story about a man who returned to Tennessee to visit the places he remembered from his youth. "Over 60: Scenes frozen in memory," reads the headline. It makes me wonder if I will ever get to do the same.

The New York Times, she went on, said it snowed in New York that Tuesday. Snow mixed with a little rain. Wednesday morning they predicted it would be partly sunny. Back then, I explain, I had never seen snow.

When she arrives at The New York Times obituary, I stop her. Listed are the names of 29 men and 23 women. I count the women:

Dorthy	Marisol
Esther	Anne
Marie	Sophie
Alexandra	Lillian
Gertude	Mary

Carole	Martha
Jean	Rose
Beatrice	Slyvia
Evelyn	Laura
Carolyn	Ruth
Myriam	Ann
Evelyn	

The girl who knows my son does not know I am counting, so she asks me another question: Have you ever come close to death? I sit looking at her, searching for my answer. She looks back at me, but not because she's waiting. I think she might be listening.

"Mi prima Conchita died crossing la frontera," I tell her, because it seems fitting. "La migra called to tell us three years ago in February."

I keep talking, and as I talk I move my hand into my jean pocket to feel for the safety pin my mother once gave me. Recently, I bent it in half.

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My mother didn't tell her children bedtime stories, because she couldn't hear the sounds of a Chilac night — the crickets chirping or the way my eight siblings and I whined in sleep, me dreaming of the city of churches, the bells and their iron knocks ringing just two hours north of us.

My mother couldn't hear Chilac's sounds because my father hit her on the head with the butt of his silver pistol. But, even so, I'll always believe she couldn't hear because, even then, she didn't understand that none of us belong anywhere without love.

Twenty-six years ago, a February 28, we wore black to blend in with the night. I had dreamt of leaving México since I was 13, the year I fell in love with a boy named Oscar, but who I would later leave for a man who told me he would take me to los Estados Unidos if I gave him my hand.

I knew this man four days when I accepted his offer. And in a matter of months I would give birth to a girl and name her Verónica. I was 17. A year later we crossed the desert together, but not holding hands. And with his back to me, meandering through the alleys of mountains, I decided I'd name my next my next child, a boy whose face would later grow to resemble mine, after this man.

I would name my son after his father not for love, or because a woman should, but because in México I had just one bra and two panties and allá in Nueva York I was sure their father would give my children more. Verónica slept in my arms as we crossed. Her hand held mine.

In México, when my mother said goodbye, she asked only one thing of me: to pin my name to the black clothes I wore that Tuesday, so that if I died under the sun, at least the memory of my life and the weight of my body dragged between wrinkled, stony mountains and abandoned

along the edges of the devil's highway, would not go unread when la migra found me and took me away.

Holding my hand, my mother offered a sliver of paper pierced by the thorn of a safety pin. But to document this crossing is nothing but a curse: shame and humiliation, a record of the desperate migrant who failed and died crossing under the sun.

I did not pin my name to my body, because with or without a papered name, too many migrant bodies and theirs memories are buried in unmarked graves on both sides of the border³.

Besides, in dying, my name would not have been listed in The New York Times obituary: Marcela Sandoval Islas.

³Last summer a woman from my building shared with me a newspaper article that us Mexicanas later passed amongst ourselves as a way to share the burden of what it told. The article reported that researchers had dug up migrant bodies from 52 graves in a Texas cemetery named Sacred Heart Burial Park. This cemetery, the article said, is less than two hours away from the Mexican border. These researchers were apparently hoping to maybe, somehow, identify the bodies – whose number was unclear because the body remains had been all mixed up. In one grave three bodies were found stuffed in a single body bag — imagina. In another, they found at least five people, some stored in small garbage bags. But this was not the first time this cemetery and its spirits had been disturbed. The year before researchers dug up 110 bodies. These were also nameless. Supposedly, a local funeral home named Funeraria del Angel Howard-Williams had handled these burials, and the county paid them to do this. This had been their business for some 16 years. But in México — this I know — the bodies of migrants are treated worse, because the gangs care very little for anything but themselves. Some, oh, five years ago, I remember hearing that 55 bodies that were guessed to be the bodies of Central and South American migrants were found in an old mine near Taxco, Guerrero. A month later another 50 or so were found at a trash dumpsite in Nuevo León. And one month after this another 70 something were found in a field somewhere in Tamaulipas. Mexican officials, I'll never forget, said it was unclear if these bodies had been killed all at once or over time. All this...all this... happened in a summer.

We (which probably means us sisters) always understood our mother belonged

to the distant

constellation

of islands

inside

her name:

Beatriz

Islas

where love never docked along the borders of her divided island shores, but where my father found his way towards the corners of her mouth that now tell me when I worry she will die having never found happiness: “No hija, yo estaba feliz con ustedes. Pero, dime, ¿porqué no me fui cuando me preguntaste, verdad?”

“No sé, Mamá, no sé,” I say, lying through my teeth.

It’s only then that I remember my mother in the shadow of my father.

I wish happiness between a married man and woman was as easy as a bar

of soap in the shower, like it was for the doctor and his wife in the book on their (as well as another's) love in a time of cholera⁴. But with, or without, soap in the shower, my marriage was an unhappy one.

It is hard for me to speak about the violences my husband brought into my life, as many years ago I taught myself how to forget them. There are no details in these memories, no faces or words or songs. I do not even say his name. I remember only fear.

In 1991, after three years of living in Nueva York, I gave birth to a son. I named him after his father just as I always said I would, but I would only ever call him Junior.

Shortly after his birth we returned to México so my son could meet my mother.

Marcela Sandoval Islas — “once upon a time,” they say — found love in Chilac, Puebla, but left it behind to take her chances dreaming herself across el camino del diablo. There I believed, they say, that if I hummed through the desert and its noche negra, (where dew is born in the night, like flowers are born in the garden, and love born in the soul) I would find what I was looking for en el otro lado, but never realize that none of us belong anywhere without love.

⁴ I once read the novel *Love in a Time of Cholera*, and was so struck by the happy simplicity of the marriage of Dr. Urbino and his wife Fermina Daza, that it always stuck with me. So happy was their marriage that only until the doctor is showering one morning and notices that Fermina forgot to replace the bar of soap in the bathroom does the couple experience their first conflict in 30 years of marriage. He blames her for this. She refuses to acknowledge her mistake. And they carry this conflict around with them for many days. So many days pass that the doctor begins sleeping in an other room, until one day he falls asleep on their bed while reading. When Fermina wakes him and instructs him to move to the other room, he looks at her and pleads, “Let me stay here. There was soap.” The fight ends. They go back to being happy.

In the Zamora Valley of Michoacán there is an hour named “la hora de ausencia.” It is an hour not to remember the spirits stuck under river stones, or the ghosts who rise in the steam of boiling water, or the voices of those passed whose names have faded across their tombs, but for those of us far away,

en el otro lado

so we can send letters and messages and special songs to our families and lovers *allá*, and so the little voices inside radios can read our words aloud for all those in México to hear; for all those who care to listen.

On the phone with my mother I tell her all the things I’d like to announce to the world during *la hora de ausencia*: about the time my son went to visit her and she made him *papas fritas* and later told me of the incident with the words: “Le enseñé el amor.” Or the time my mother and I fought because I told her not to ship me her *mole rojo* and she consented if I promised to make it for dinner exactly the way she taught me. And then there was the time I told her, “Mami I will come back to you” and she replied: “You’re already here, *mi’ja*; in the steam of every morning’s tea.”

But in Chilac, Puebla, *mi pueblito natal* of orange blossoms and overweight dreams, where my mother couldn’t put her children to sleep because she didn’t know the lullabies of bedtime stories, there is no such hour.

In Chilac, wives left behind hear no love songs. Mothers go without hearing the promises of their children until the ring of a phone. A grandmother down the street, my mother tells me, hoards the boxes of chocolates her son sends home. It is all she has left of him, she says.

In Chilac, Puebla, there are days, months, there are years, named *ausencia*. In them are the hours that arrest the mechanics of time, that re-

member spirits stuck under river stones, ghosts rising in the steam of boiled water, or those who fell in the desert, or drowned in the river, bodies still dreaming of a place called home, buried in nameless graves.

And after my message streams through the radio, I would request the song *Levántame la moral* by Los Caminantes because Mami always loved to dance to *las canciones de los mariachis*. “Mamita,” the small voices inside radios would say my words, “ahora ya te puedes morir porque ya escuchaste el mariachi de tu hija.”

When crossing, my husband carried the temper of my son across his face. From behind him and *el coyote*, I carried our daughter and walked beside my husband’s sister for many hours humming *La Negra Noche* under my breath.

When we went to rest in the shadows of desert mountains, I listened for the iron church bells of Puebla, México (that hazy place my mother and I might meet) that I thought I could hear deep inside my ears.

In sleep I dreamt of my mother whispering the tale of a little girl in red who is torn from the belly of a wolf who has led her...
...astray.

The second time I crossed *la frontera* was very fast and, perhaps due to the nature of such a speed (20 minutes sprinting), also very sad. It was five on an April morning and *la migra* chased us from behind as the fifty-something bodies ran through the southbound lanes of the San Ysidro port of entry — a bygone way of crossing that the girl who knows my son tells me is called a “*banzai run*” and which is meant to reference the high-speed outlaw racers who cruised the streets of Southern California in the 1980s. “It’s

the Italian philosophy of driving,” the girl who knows my son quotes one of these outlaw racers from a 1981 newspaper article she has brought with her to my home. “You drive so fast you don’t have time to look back.” She is translating from English to Spanish. Her Spanish needs work.

Weaving through the heavy traffic, I looked straight ahead that morning. My vision was impaired as the tears from my father’s words (“¡Váyanse! Espero que tú y tus hijos mueran.”) lingered inside the crevices of my eyes and along my eyelashes like dew on a spider’s web. In his telling me this, I knew I was leaving México for good, and that I would never go back.

No he vuelto.

My husband and I had returned to México so our son could meet his abuelita. When we crossed back across the border, I did not know that I would be leaving my husband and six months later crossing alone; though alone I went, leaving my husband in México because he was a bad man who also, like my father, made me cry.

It was in leaving my husband that my father told me he hoped my children and I would die.

It was in leaving my husband that I left my mother with hers.

It was in leaving my husband and going north that I hoped I would escape the towns in México that are built so women have to depend on husbands.

Te quiero, Mamá. Cuidate y un día regresaré por ti. No para Papá, solamente por ti.

Apparently, in Southern California there were frequent banzai runs, in which men in expensive and sleek cars drove so fast above the speed limit (200 miles per hour) that they went beyond the reach of law. Later in the 1990s, the girl who knows my son tells me, migrants like me did the same. The sheer number of those sprinting across the highway meant la migra couldn't possibly catch us all.

It's clear to me now why we outlaws didn't look back. We were, due to the nature of speeding, momentarily freed. Looking back only allowed one to enact the charms and thorns of nostalgia, and when one moves faster than they ever thought possible, there's no time for that.

But if I had looked back that morning I worry that I would have tripped on the words my mother said to me when I came back to México so she could meet her grandson: "You've made me cry, mi'ja. I was waiting for your return."

But I did not look back, for my own two children were waiting for me up north in Santa Ana.

Gracias a dios fue rápido.

I will be remembered by no man;
as no man lurks in my shadow or skips stones in my heart.
I only ask that I find the way back

to the constellation

of islands

that make up

my mother's name:

Beatriz

Islas,

A woman from my building who works with a Polish woman cleaning houses told me that this Polish woman said that in the Poland countryside they used to ring a bell when death visited. The rang the bell, she said, to remind those still left with memories to pray for the soul departed. She said they ring these bells in other places too, some places one knock for each life lost and others one knock for each year they dreamt under the stars.

I'm told this was meant as a kind of ringed hiss to keep the devil who crouches behind death's shadows away. And I like this image, to imagine fear on a devil's face, because the bell I ring and its low riding song blurs, erases even, his reflection and fills that February desert space with a field of dahlias and the ocean and a stove melting butter.

(What does a bell singing in the desert sound like, anyway?)

Because she, mi prima, would have had 49 knocks on that bell; and maybe one for her soul departed would have been enough to scare a devil's dust mirage away.

La migra called mi prima's sister, who called me before dawn. She had no water, la migra said. Not enough water to cross, she told me. And I remember thinking, Wow, agua was my son's, Fernando's, first English word.

(I want to know, what does a child know, really?)

I hear these death bells no longer ring in Poland and that the rest of the

places have also stopped their ringing. But when I hear outside my window Brooklyn's sleepy church bells hum the hours, I wait for the third hour of every afternoon because 49 hours don't exist in a day, and I'm afraid one knock wouldn't scare the devil away, and mi prima Concha died three years ago today.

so I can tell my mother we are lucky no ocean

divides

us,

and that I've found a kind of love in the birth of my baby boy,
torn from my bellied darkness in the month of May,
whose love (despite his anger) might let me belong to this new
place.

At least, that's what they say.

It is October 16, 2014 and I tell the girl who knows my son: "I don't think I ever had dreams."

"Do you dream in sleep?" she asks.

I pause. She listens to it.

"Sometimes I dream of having returned to México to see my mother. But then I dream that I have no money or food or work. So when I go to hug and kiss my mother, I tell her, 'Mamita ya vine a verte pero mañana ya me regreso.'"

Para mi esos sueños son ciertos.

If I can learn to listen to the night, the sirens and guns snapping as my children whine in sleep because they are dreaming of chiming places we all might meet, then maybe the violences of this new life will turn into the crickets chirping...a song I long ago stole from the other side.

And in learning to listen, it's then I'll tell my children next time they go to dream: "It was, and it was not so."

"Here I sit on what looks like a stone. Only my memory knows what it holds."*

In the 1500s, Spanish missionaries built great stone palaces in what was then called Nueva España, and what is now called México. These palaces were where los indios learned to speak a different Mother Tongue and where new ideas of discipline became the condition for living. This condition included time, or rather, another time. Clocks and bells were raised and hung inside those stone palaces, bestowing on los indios European notions of time. It was a gift, the missionaries said. The gift of another time.

My mother and I also live in another time, though ours is different from the gift of the missionaries.

"Present time," I tell the girl who knows my son, "escapes us. It eludes us. We have only the past and parts of the future; whatever parts those may be."

I visit my mother in dreams where she still walks about the house and laughs, though she tells me neither is true because she is sick and no

one besides my father (who is not a funny man) is there to make her laugh. Sometimes, my mother says, the woman I pay to bathe and feed my mother brings a smile to her face because sometimes she mistakes her for me or one of my sisters.

According to my mother, she visits me in daydreams, a place she says I am still the 21-year-old girl I was when she last saw me. I am now 43. She says she cannot picture it.

In my fantasies my mother and I walk the streets of Puebla, México, the city of churches whose bells keep straight time.

“That is where I’d like to meet you, Mami,” I tell her over the phone.

“¿We never went there cuando eras niña, verdad?” she asks.

“No Mami, nunca fuimos.”

I also see my mother each night when I undress for bed, the hook shaped scar on my right arm that my father gave me for falling in love with a boy reminds me of how my mother didn’t stop him from hurting me. (“Pégame Papi, porque palos por amor no duelen.”) I was 13-years-old. Mi madre se fue al cuarto.

“Some scars go away with time,” my mother tells me on the phone when we speak of love – though she is not speaking of body scars.

In Elena Garro’s novel *Los recuerdos del porvenir*, a servant obeys an old custom of his master’s house by stopping the clocks each night at 9 P.M. In doing so the house and its people are able to escape “the shackles of mechanical time.” But one night the servant forgets to do this, and the girl

of the house, Isabel Moncada, is finally able to move to a future she clearly remembers.

“A mi mamá yo la quiero mucho y sí quisiera verla, pero a veces el orgullo es más que el amor,” I tell the girl who knows my son who has asked, “Who is responsible for the suffering of your mother?” If I was to turn to stone it would be of onyx, because in Puebla onyx comes in plenty and the stone’s color mirrors a black hole and black holes not only do not keep time, but deform it.

“I am only a memory and the memory that [my mother] has of me.”**

It
is
possible
to step
outside
of shadows,
Mami.... to cross
a street, the rivers
inside our names,
and interrupt
a memory.
Once I believed you
could do it.
I think, Mami....
I believe in
you, now.
I can help,
si me permites.
Permíteme, Mami....
la agua no es tan escalofriane.

P.D.

My mother, Beatriz Islas, passed away on April 12, 2015 in the night. I spoke to her by phone before she went, and told her I was sorry for not being by her side. She hushed me, her tired voice telling me she understood.

That night when the girl who knows my son called to console me, I couldn't help but think of Conchita — not mi prima, but the girl from Ismael Rodríguez's film *Nosotros los pobres* — and the moment when she is reunited with her unknown mother just before the mother dies.

“¿Marcela? Habla Alana. ¿Qué pasó? ¿Estás bien?”

“No niña, ahora si ya tengo una tumba para llorar.”

** The first sentence of chapter one in the English translation of Elena Garro's novel *Los recuerdos del porvenir*

** A sentence from chapter one in *Los recuerdos del porvenir*